The new Missal in Arabic

A work of the Church of Jerusalem for all Latin Catholic parishes in the Arab world

During this Advent, a new Missal has been made available from Jerusalem to be sent throughout the Arab world. This small diocese is in fact responsible for producing, revising and sharing the missal which is then used in all the Arabic-speaking dioceses of the world. An important gift that reminds us of the centrality of the Church of Jerusalem.

“The first edition of the missal in Arabic was produced in 1983-84 and is the one still in use today,” says Father Aziz Halaweh, director of the Liturgical Office of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The edition available from December 2022 is, he explains, “the second one and was made following the latest editions of the Roman Missal from 2008. In this edition, the Arabic translation has been revised from the Latin text while, in the previous one, we took the Italian version as a starting point. This will allow us to be more faithful to the original.”

This substantial work took nine years. “Our liturgical office was re-established by Patriarch Pizzaballa three years ago. For the past two years, I have taken over the coordination of the work that had already begun seven years ago,” shares Father Aziz.

Before, in fact, the liturgical mission within the Patriarchate was not carried out by a designated office but by a bishop who was in charge of the liturgy assisted by a few priests. “Now, with the office,” the head of the liturgical office continues, “we have a clerk and also a liturgical commission representing various realities of the diocese in Palestine, Israel and Jordan. For the revision of the Arabic tradition, a specialised committee was established in which we have a Latinist, an Arabist, a biblical scholar, a theologian, a bishop, a liturgist and also a musicologist because we also revised all the music.”

The monumental effort behind the publication of the new missal took into account the important contribution of the arts to this work, both in terms of the musical and visual aspect through a number of icons that embellish the missal and help to enter into an attitude of prayer.

Father Aziz, who also has a musical background, explains this aspect further: “There was a need to revise the music in accordance with the Arabic language for Gregorian chant. Fortunately, the Arabic spelling is very close to the Latin spelling for Gregorian, so we were able to set to music in Arabic everything that is set to music in Latin. Clearly, as the Arabic script goes from right to left, it is not easy to associate it with the music that goes from left to right, but we have succeeded.”

The images that enrich the missal are the work of Sister Maria Ruiz from the Sisters of Bethlehem community in Deir Rafat. Sister Maria had already been called by Patriarch Pizzaballa to illustrate the entire Gospel Book and had accepted this assignment at the end of 2020.

In March 2021, she was also asked to produce the images that we will now find in the new Missal. “At that time,” Sister Maria recounts, “we had just started the Evangeliarium: only a few images, mainly from the Gospel of Luke, had already been produced.” Thus, thanks to the tireless work of Sister Maria, the new Missal will have the same style as the new Gospel Book, an original style but also – at the Patriarch’s request – emblematic of all the various influences (Byzantine, Latin, Armenian, etc.) of the Mother Church of Jerusalem.

The missal is an altar book for priests and, working with a commission also on translations, some formulae have also been revised in Arabic. For example, Father Aziz explains the change that was made to the invitation to communion that immediately follows the Lamb of God. In Arabic it read: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those invited to the banquet of the Lord”. Now the formula, as in other languages and on the basis of Latin, has become: “Blessed are those invited to the supper of the Lamb”. The Collect prayer, the prayer over the offerings and the prayer after communion have also been modified and enriched.

Clearly, on the basis of this, the booklets for the faithful will also be revised, although care was taken not to change the responses of the people too much. “The diocese parish of Jerusalem, with our help, produces a Sunday leaflet that is distributed in the other parishes where all the new formulas are, thus allowing the people of God to fully follow the liturgy enriched with these changes together with the priest,” concludes Father Aziz.

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